

CULTURAL AND ISLAMIC VALUES IN RELATION WITH DEATH

Dr. Anissa Brighet Assous

Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba, Algeria

Abstract

This paper is based on my observations of Algerians' common reactions to tragic experiences of death and mourning, the field, and information taken from various written sources. My approach is not based on contrasting Arab society with the West. Yet, I am not focusing on the Muslim world as a whole where various traditions, cultures and sects present different questions and complexities. Rather, my choice has been to write about death in the Arab and Sunni world in general and, the Algerian society in particular, by researching in hospital institutions and collecting people's views of death and dying. By screening Sunni religious beliefs and ancestral values and traditions, I hope to understand the behavior of Algerian people when faced with a serious crisis such as kidnapping, death and mourning.

Keywords: Religion, Muslims, Arab society

Introduction

In dealing with the subject of death and dying for more than two years, gathering culture's view, interacting with dying patients, getting clear on crucial points by questioning those who experienced tragic moments in life, as well as witnessing death and dying with members of my own family, friends and relatives, I was able to find peace, and finally accept the loss of dear ones.

For the purpose of understanding the faith of Sunni Muslims, Islam as well as culture and tradition are influences on the thoughts, beliefs and hopes of the Algerian people. This paper describes the understanding of bitter experiences lived by Algerian men and women when faced with death, missing persons and grief beginning with the death of the individual, and ending with the important concept of resurrection.

The Sunni tradition

This presentation is limited to works within the Sunni tradition within the Arab context. For specific details, Algeria is taken as an example. I chose Algeria because being

myself Algerian; I knew the values, customs, popular practices, traditions in addition to a variant Mediterranean heritage.

Indeed, generalizing this work to the Arab world as a whole would be missing its aim, especially as the Algerian experience alone is complex enough. So far as I know, different dialects are oral, classical Arabic is written but not spoken, French (proper to colonialism) is mostly used by the elite, the Sunna which prevails over the Koran (it clarifies and explains what God wants to say in his book), without forgetting all the intellectual and artistic knowledge which characterizes the Algerian society making it a distinct entity. Having made this clear, I would like to show the most common reactions to tragic experiences.

Feeling of resignation in time of crisis

Ian Young is an English medical student who took his midwifery training in an Algerian hospital. I present two cases taken from the diary he began shortly after he arrived in Algeria. I hope to illustrate the behavior of men in a hospital when faced with the truth of life or death. Actually, these cases minutely picked up from his valuable fieldwork are still very representative of the fatalistic attitude so commonly observed these days in the average Algerian man in taking a major decision that involves self-consciousness.

First case

At 7:50, the door opens and maternity fills with people. A man wants his baby born in the night two months immature. The baby has been left on the scales in front of the air conditioner, because the incubators in pediatrics are full. It's going to die! In fact, it's already dead! It's down in the register as stillborn. In front of the father, I feel ashamed, at a loss of words. I'm afraid of the recrimination when I tell him his baby's too premature to live. But, he seems to accept the news well. He tells me "he's taking the baby to Algiers"; he begins a new job there tomorrow. I suddenly realize he's taking it to Algiers, literally. He's not taking it to a hospital in Algiers. I tell him "it would probably die on the way". He smiles and shrugs; or rather he has a movement of the mouth you would call a smile, a movement of the shoulders you would call a shrug (*Ian Young, The private life of Islam, 1974, PP10-23*).

What appears at first sight as a nonchalant attitude may be a formal phrase of daily language. These ritual phrases provide daily conversation in the Algerian society which expresses resignation to the hazards of time, abandonment to the divine will and belief in the 'Maktub' – what is written in the Qu'ran. Thus, they shape the Algerian attitude which accounts for one's movement and rationalization of conduct. It seems evident, that this British student newly installed in this hospital, ignores all about the Algerian culture and the working class economic condition of that time. We should recall at this point that in the 70's,

took place the three revolutions (cultural, agrarian and industrial) of the president Boumedienne. The economy was then flourishing. Therefore, a proposal of a job in a state institution in the capital, Algiers, meant not only a better life for the family, but also a good education for the children (not further than the 60's, the rate of illiteracy was maximal). More importantly, there was the advantage of an apartment in the capital for a fixed and modest rent (Socialist economic system). Keeping this in mind, for a family man, trying his chance in Algiers is a godsend, which doesn't give room to a guilty conscience. Moreover, his religious conviction that the fate of men is only decided by God is a good power of persuasion in the decision of taking the baby home to die.

At this point then, what is called a 'shrug' is a clear sign of apathetic submission. It is also important to bear in mind at this point, the medical student's ignorance of the Sunni mentality as well. In reality, the acceptance of death, most often expressed through a moment of silence (interpreted as indifference) is a common attitude of powerlessness in the Algerian Sunni mentality. As a matter of fact, the English student himself confirmed the eventuality of the baby's death. So, when we say that Muslims are fatalists, this may be linked to their belief in 'Maktub'. Therefore, we can say that the Qu'ran which is a vehicle of the thought and its expression is formative of mentality. Indeed, this type of religiosity, expressed mainly by ritual words, a common daily language, prescriptions and prohibitions as well as opinions on death and life result from the interaction of ethnic groups, in the form of ways of behavior and popular beliefs.

2nd case

A Peugeot 403 draws up at the end of the path. The man inside it gets out and comes into the office. He's come to collect his wife. I check on the register and remember the girl well. She came in bleeding, but with her cervix still closed. She's resting in bed. The bleeding's stopped, and with a little more rest she should be able to keep the baby. I tell him that "she should stay in a little while longer". "Take her back to the mountains now and to her daily routine, she'll almost certainly lose the baby". "He's taking his wife home", he says, "There are children to look after and a home to keep". If she stays in the hospital, he can't go to work; he's in danger of losing his job. I explain it all again, and ask "how far he's from the hospital". "He's four hours away", he says. "Supposing she miscarries", I tell him. By the time he's found a car and gets her here, she could be already dead, especially as she's so weak already. "But there is water to fetch", says the man, "figs to pick, fields to look after, the house, the children . . ." "Aren't there people nearby who can help?" "There is no one", says the husband. "But then", I say, "it'll only be worse if your wife does die; you'll have no one to

help you at all". I ask him "if he has another woman he could marry if this one dies, who'd be able to do her work". He shakes his head: "There is no one else". He hesitates, perhaps he's going to change his mind and let her stay. But suddenly the husband shakes himself. "I don't care!" He cries "I just want her back and she won't do any work". "That's not true", I say. "Oh, let her die! Let her die!" He shouts, "Give me that paper to sign! If my wife dies, ok. If I die, ok. If my children die, ok. We will all die!" (*Ibid*)

These two cases then are good examples of the display of resignation in time of crisis. With this regard, Edward William Lane gives precise details: "Belief in predestination predisposed men to display in times of distressing uncertainty, an exemplary patience and, after any afflicting event, a remarkable degree of resignation and fortitude, approaching nearly to apathy; generally exhibiting their sorrow only by a sigh, and the exclamation of "God is bountiful". But, the women on the contrary, give vent to their grief by the most extravagant cries and shrieks. The same belief in predestination renders the Muslim utterly devoid of presumption with regard to his future actions, or to any future events. He never speaks of anything that he intends to do, or any circumstance, which he expects, and hopes may come to pass, without adding, "It is the will of Allah" (*Ibid*).

Indeed, even though the description of Edward William Lane dates back several years, it seems to still fit perfectly with the behavior of the average Algerian Muslim of today. Generally speaking, the behavior of men, reluctantly determined is guided by religious laws and moral rules. Having said that, as far as the Arab thought is concerned, Vincent Mansour Monteil, a professor at the University of Paris, who has spent more than thirty years dealing with Arabs and defending their thought makes it clear that: "The Arab thought is, first of all, a religious thought which has its source from the Qu'ranic revelation ... we could see in it a symbolic explanation, global and transcendental, of the visible and invisible world, and of the destiny of man; or also a system of beliefs and practices which involve relations with a superior principle, and characteristic of a social group. The Muslim though is fixed in his book revealed in Arabic, the Qu'ran, a collection of 114 chapters (surates)... it is to him that we always return and, in the individual or collective, unconsciousness, of the believers, there are like hidden, words heavy in meaning, loaded with an irreplaceable religious affectivity (*Vincent Mansour Monteil, 1987, p15-16*). And concerning the passive attitude of the Muslim, Monteil says: "Two passages of the revelation are essential: 'All good that happens to you comes from God, all evil that strikes you is from you' (*Koran IV, 79*). The problem of free will, and therefore of human responsibility is too often badly posed by those, who aren't themselves Muslims, think explaining everything by evoking the 'fatalism'. In fact, the

believer leaves it to the will of God... It remains, that the popular belief in “what is written” (Maktub) can lead a passive attitude (*Monteil Vincent Mansour, 1987, p77-78*).

Keeping all this in mind, the case of the mountain dweller triggers a feeling of ambivalence that rises at the same time compassion and irritation. On the one hand, as far as this family man is concerned, that is evident that losing his job is far more tragic than losing a fetus. In reality, the expression “let his die, it is the will of God” is only a sign of acceptance of the will of god. If his wife miscarries, if she dies or if they all die is evidently the will of God. And, if this mountain dweller insists on taking his wife back to the mountains despite her fatigue, it is simply because the well being of the children as well as the survival of the family depends on her sole presence there. He clumsily justifies his decision by citing her duties at home and in the field as though while being sick, he could still rely on her for these heavy tasks. But, it seems evident that his problem is related to his bad socio-economic condition. So, if she remains hospitalized, since there is no one else to watch the kids, he will certainly lose his job. As matters stand, for him, the life of a fetus doesn’t count more than his only means of livelihood. And then again, for him the fate of the baby or even that of his wife is inevitably determined by the personal decision of God.

On the other hand, as far as the wife is concerned, it remains true that even though high education plays a fundamental role in the abandonment of superstition, rigid traditions and clan customs, only social and economic advantages can modify mentalities in an irreversible fashion as far as women are concerned. The second case shows clearly that the fate of the woman is within her husband’s grasp. In the 70’s and unfortunately even in this very day, many low educated women are still accompanied to the doctor by their husbands. Strangely, he is the one who converses with him concerning his wife’s health condition, and may even take her fate in hand. If that is how things are, people’s view of women will not change for a good while specially seeing that Algerians find a Qu’ranic legitimating for their tutelage over women, “Men are guardians over women because Allah has made some of them excel others, and because they (men) spend of their wealth, and guard the secrets of their husbands with Allah’s protection” (*Surate Al-Nisa, Verse 35, The Holy Qu’ran, Rabwah, Pakistan, 1979, P78*). So, the Qu’ranic legitimating remains of great influence in the lack of status for many Algerian women, at least in their husbands’ home. With this regard, Nawal el Saadawi confirms: “Whatever improvement there has been in the personal status of women, as wives or mothers, is not so much due to the law...but rather to the socio-economic changes that have taken place in some countries ... Men exercise their tutelage over women because

as stated in the Qu'ran, they provide them with the means of livelihood (*Nawal El Saadawi, 1980, pp123, 143, 144*).

So, while being greatly influenced by his religious conviction, in the mind of this mountain dweller, it is clear that authority is his right; thereby he takes the most appropriate decision for the well being of his family and obedience is the duty of his wife; from which her submissive attitude even when things are coming to a crisis.

Making death meaningful

The Algerian people learn to cope with death and dying at an early age. In fact, they draw upon religious beliefs, customs and community support to make death and dying more meaningful in life. This way, death becomes an integral part of their life. In addition to cultural acceptance of death, religious teachings also remind them of death through for example religious sayings such as: "We belong to Allah and to Allah we return". This saying usually used whenever death occurs is as a matter of fact a reminder that only Allah knows one's destiny. Thus, for the Algerian believer, raised in a fatalistic community, death is not only familiar but is also part of his faith in Allah.

In the Algerian culture, whenever one hears of death, will it be that of relative, a friend or a neighbor, he/she must present his/her condolences. Men must attend the funeral ceremony and pray for the soul of the dead. The ceremony is simple and does not take long. So, on the social as well as the religious level, there is no valuable excuse for not attending the burial especially that being buried is cited in the Holy Qu'ran as being one of the basic rights of the Muslim believer.

So, taking into consideration the religious beliefs and the cultural approval of the community participation in the dying process; seeing the body in his natural state, with no signs of artificial beauty and kissing the dead as a mark of respect, but only before the ceremonial bath becomes an essential part of coping and accepting death as a natural event in this Muslim society.

Moreover, it is also important to mention at this point that even though it is hard for anyone to see a loved one dying or dead when he used to be so active and so present in everyday life and, realize then that the loved one is gone forever, it is obvious that viewing death as a natural event that may come at any time no matter who the person is, helps the mourner live a meaningful life.

It is evident that what Algerians do during the day, how they relate to each other, and how they gain or spend their wealth, illustrates the tight control that Islam exercises over their daily life. So, it becomes clear that religious beliefs which present a fundamental system of

meanings and values are in close agreement with the spirit of the Algerian culture. Thus, any good deed done in life, e.g. being patient in times of sorrow, being forgiving and sensitive to others' needs, any smile or touching hand is culturally interpreted as scoring points for the benefits of the Muslim believer when the Day of Judgment comes. In a word then, we can affirm that life in Algerian communities can only be meaningful once closely associated with destiny. As such, it is clear that the Algerian society not only affirms death as a normal process but, sees also home as the best place to spend the last hours of life.

The best place where a patient dies

Generally speaking, both hospital professionals and family members would rather have a patient die at home than in a hospital institution. With this respect, Doctor Med Tewfik Brighet of Constantine Hospital (CHU) whom I talked to at the time of my fieldwork testified having collected enough evidence of terminal patients who chose to go home to die as the ultimate hour approached. And, many nurses I questioned about this crucial point, affirmed that not only the family of the dying takes on the full responsibility of taking their dear one home but, it is often at the patient's request that the hospital decides to let him go. As a matter of fact, we often hear of family members taking the terminally ill patient home where he dies few weeks or even few days later. Yet, it happens also that hospital professionals still give hope to a dying patient and even program new treatments that only relieve pain and stabilize biological parameters. Obviously, this illusion of hope given to the terminally ill who lives far from the hospital institution allows more time to the family to see him and prepare his death. But, as soon as the family feels ready to face death, the patient is taken home to die.

The dying patient is usually seen by hospital professionals as a human creature with fears, pain and apprehension when it comes to death and dying. Thus, sending him home to a warm, comforting and more humane surrounding is a way to preserve his dignity. Thus, allowing him to die in peace and serenity. These last moments spent with the loved one, caring for him and keeping him company make him forget at least for a moment his continuous pain and apprehension. This way not only the patient faces death with less fear but, he also has a last chance to spend good moments with those he loves. Even children are allowed to see the dying, kiss him and listen to his prayers.

Indeed, in our community, home is seen as the best place to die in. Then, it becomes evident that the best place where one dies depends on the culture the person lives in. But, it is also in connection with the patient's fear of being alone with no familiar faces around when the ultimate hour comes.

The feeling of loneliness

Instead of denying death and fearing the aging process, the Algerians are socialized in affirming death and accepting destiny. Being religious fanatics when it comes to the question of death and dying, they do not fear bad spirits for listening to the Holy Qu'ran and praying is believed to expel evil spirits from their surroundings thereby bringing comfort and peace.

Usually, people do not know what to say or what to do to comfort the dying or his family when there is no hope left. The feeling of helplessness and sometimes guilt makes people feel uncomfortable in front of those in despair so, they shorten or even put an end to their usual visit to the dying. In reality, they ignore that their presence alone is of great comfort to both the dying and his family. In the Algerian culture, being together in times of pain and sorrow and touching one's hand is of great importance at the social and religious level. Therefore, going through death and dying with neighbors, friends and relatives around not only ease the agony of the dying but comfort those around as well.

At the time of my frequent visits to friends and family members who remained hospitalized for severe illness a long period of time, I have often been affected by the tremendous joy I recorded on their faces. Most of them disclosed a terrible feeling of loneliness despite the presence of other patients around. For terminal patients, being well surrounded with happy and familiar faces takes away much of their fear and apprehension.

As I said earlier, in the Algerian society whether the patient is hospitalized or biding his time at home, he is always well surrounded with familiar faces. And, even though, Algerians value the old saying "when there is life, there is hope" at the final stage of illness, they multiply their prayers and urge others to do the same in the hope that death comes quickly and painlessly. Nevertheless, what is controversial is that while close ones are always willing to spend few hours beside a somnolent or moaning patient, they still wish deep inside that death does not come in their presence. This wish to be spared witnessing death does not really denote some fear of death but, it actually translates an outward apprehension of possibly being confronted with the family deep grief and sorrow at the moment of immediate death. Indeed, for the Algerian family, the hour following death is particularly painful. Then, only close ones; those who really knew the dead and loved him dearly could sincerely feel the deep pain of losing him. So, at this point, it is important to underline the cultural and religious values of the community in which the dying lives in order to understand better how his family handles his death.

Cultural and religious values in relation with death

In the Muslim society, life begins at the age of forty. And it is only at this age that the person is believed to reach full maturity and is judged stable and wise enough to make the best choices. For that matter, the Prophet Muhammad, the last messenger of Allah, was chosen to receive the illuminating Book, the Qu' ran, when he was forty. And because forty is seen as the best age, usually the Algerians cry and weep a person who dies between the age of forty and sixty much longer than a younger or older one.

In our community, most often, it is the dying person who calls everyone together, prays for all his family and makes the required planning. Similarly, people are called to attend the burial. While women keep company to the family of the deceased, men and older children carry the coffin to the mosque where the Imam holds the funeral prayer. After the collective prayer over the soul of the dead, the burial takes place. Only then, lunch which is prepared by neighbors and relatives since the family of the deceased is not supposed to cook for three days is served to anyone present. Eating from this particular meal is believed to purify the soul of the deceased. For this reason, no one actually refuses to taste it much more to please the family than by religious conviction.

So, culture as well as religion gives meaning to life and death as well. Most often, dying persons have an active role in their own death; planning the distribution of wealth between members of the family, giving advices to the loved ones and even choosing their place of burial. For the terminal patient, the coffin and the food that would be served on the third and fortieth day of burial are often brought by order a short time before their own death.

The Algerian common belief is that everyone is born with a destiny – a time to be born and a time to die. For this reason, excessive grief over the dead is judged as unreasonable as being a sign of denial of Allah's will. In the Muslim tradition, it is believed that the dying knows forty days before his death that he is dying. At this specific time, spirits of close relatives communicate with him in order to prepare him for the travel. As a matter of fact, only a week before his death, my father confided to us having seen his own father accompanied with other close relatives dead a long time before urging him to hurry up for they were all expecting him. He talked about seeing Mecca, the Holy place, and even went into a detailed description of what happened to be his gravestone. In short, I have often heard similar stories in funeral ceremonies.

The main signs of dying in addition to the parting words of the dying are the loss of appetite, insomnia and the appearance of Hematoses at the finger tips and toes. At this stage then, looking after the dying at all times to comfort him and lessen his fear and apprehension

becomes a priority. At the same time, family members anxious about painful agony multiply their prayers that death comes quickly and painlessly.

It is evident that dying at home with caring people around brings comfort. Unfortunately, for different reasons, still many Algerian patients who remain hospitalized despite their short life expectancy fear confronting death and dying (Rabah Boussouf, 1992).

Confronting death and dying

Paradoxically, the Algerian tradition not only sanctions the removal of hope for a recovery as only Allah can decide the real time of death but, it also forbids denial of death, for the end of life happens inevitably in due time. Having said that, hospital professionals well aware of cultural values and traditions as far as dying is concerned, are compelled to inform quickly the family of the dying of the severity of his health condition. However, they still take all their time to put the patient face to his destiny. And, despite their long experience with death and dying, many doctors and nurses I became friendly with, told me that on each new occasion, they still express pain and discomfort in letting out the cruel news of death and dying.

In fact, the Muslim tradition considers the information as an opportunity for repentance, confession and possible ordering of one's material and spiritual life including seeing and blessing family members. The last moments of the dying mean not only a possible reconciliation with Allah but also, a chance to communicate peacefully and meaningfully with dear ones.

However, informing the terminal patient about the severity of his health condition does not allow hospital professionals to deny him a sparkle of hope that gives him the necessary strength to die with dignity. Yet, "dying with dignity" refers also to being spared the agony of death or unlimited emotional distress by omitting to utilize mechanical life support systems that sustain continued life by unnatural means. This is certainly controversial for under those circumstances, one wonders how a dying patient emotionally adjusts to a limited life expectancy when the only support system that helps him cope with dying is removed.

Emotional adjustment to limited life expectancy

The patient's emotional equilibrium is maintained in that case with the continued support of the family which keeps company to the terminal patient, prays with him and comforts him by referring to Qu'ranic verses. Further, the Muslim tradition of never leaving the bedside of the dying and the community sharing in the care of the dying is of great value not only to the emotional state of the dying but also, to the family which has a chance to live

a normal life without the guilt thoughts and feelings. In addition to being of good company to the dying, the community support gives reassurance that the family will not be alone in crucial moments of death and grief.

In fact, doctors as well as nurses are supposed to communicate veritably with them, give them attention while showing compassion. And, most of all, inform them in a lucid manner and in due time about the severity of their illness. Doctors have also to remain sensitive to the patients' needs and attentive to their desire to talk in order to help them release their feelings of pain, frustration, anger and revolt (Mostefa Khiati, 1985).

Unfortunately, most medical professionals I talked to at the time of my fieldwork at Annaba main hospital, recognized not having the required skills and training to respond to the real needs of terminally ill patients. For this reason, when necessary, they would rather call upon family members to bring psychological relief and comfort to the patient who feels too desperate or lonely. Indeed, in our society, it is the family which keeps company to the dying and cares for him in the last moments of life. As such, it is the family which helps the dying, accept his imminent death and maintain a sense to his life.

Finally, it seems evident that it is in the family that the dying patient finds the strength to express his last wishes, last will and eventual hopes. And, since most often, the dying patient expresses anxieties about the process of dying and facing the unknown no matter how religious he could be, the wisdom of caring for him whether at home or in the hospital, showing him concern and bringing him support makes his life more meaningful(Thebaud.A, 1977).

Concerning the factors that predict emotional adjustment to death as well as anxieties expressed by the dying, most Algerian families who experienced death, I questioned about this crucial point whether in funeral occasions or tragic events, testified that the wisdom in caring for the dying, and observing death in the Algerian society does not allow for any temptation to deny the reality of death. Still according to Algerians who experienced hard times in life, past experiences with death and dying have shown that working through feelings of anger, guilt or anguish is a normal part of the process of grief, so vital to continuing life with serenity.

Moreover, literature has also shown that unresolved grief is the main source of later psychosomatic pain (Carry E, 1985; Laplantine F, 1992...). With this regard, I recall the case of Jolisa she went to Paris to finish her PhD in Sociology. Her son was two years old. And, since he was febrile, she left him with her mother. It happened that he fell ill and even though, she returned home in time to see him dying, she never confronted the reality of his

death. Jolisa felt terribly guilty. To her, her studies abroad weren't a valuable reason for leaving him behind, at this age. Deep inside, she felt angry and guilty. She remained depressive for more than five years and, even though, she had another baby boy soon after, she couldn't forget the first one. It is only when she realized that her marriage was going into pieces that she decided to seek psychological help. Psychotherapy helped her spill forth bad feelings. Today, Jolisa still remembers her tragedy. But, now that she went through her grief work, instead of remembering her lost baby with anger, she evokes him with a sentiment of peace and serenity.

As a matter of fact, it may take the mourner a week to several months to release all his pain, anguish and sentiment of injustice felt at the moment of death. In the case of sickness and suffering at the time of death or when the child is judged too young to die, the parent may feel that an injustice has been done. Then, only time and the help of relatives and neighbors can reason the parent into accepting death. And therefore, going through this mourning process in order to make peace with Allah and remember the deceased child with tranquility.

As such, the importance of funeral participation in resolving grief gives more meaning to the Algerian customs and values in relation with death that we talked about. Accordingly, if tradition places the responsibility for all the funeral arrangements upon the mourners, as well as demands that the religious right of the Muslim to be buried soon after his death be respected, it is precisely to help the mourner resolve his grief faster. However, outburst of emotions is still regarded as a weakness of religious faith.

The outburst of emotions

In the Algerian society, even though tears of grief are allowed among women, and even encouraged on the first day of the burial while still considered as a physical weakness among men, at the religious level calmness and lucidity is of high value. However, Excessive lamenting implies that injustice has been done which is certainly not the case since Allah is good, passionate and just. In other cases, it is believed that weeping worsens the condition of the dead. Not only are the dead usually understood to be aware of the pain their departure causes those left behind and of what is actually done with their personal things, they also feel anguish if those who wash and wrap the body in its shroud are careless. Many anecdotes indicate that disrespect to the grave and failure to care for it properly can cause extreme discomfort to its occupant.

Moreover, excessive expression of pain and sorrow is also translated in the Algerian culture as an outrageous denial of the Holy Book. So, even though Islam opposes repression of emotions, it also sanctions excessive expression of grief and sorrow while allowing a

period of mourning of no more than forty days. Beyond that, it is called on the mourner to live a normal life.

Yet, on the social level, outburst of emotions for a longer period of time translates a deep love for the dead. So, instead of being regarded as destructive, excessive grief triggers deep compassion. And, this is in sharp contradiction with the Muslim culture that expects moderation in expressing sentiments in public life as far as women of all strata are concerned.

Hence, ways of conduct that we observe in deep moments of sorrow and pain are quite obviously regulated by rituals rooted in the Holy Book and controlled by Algerian cultural values and traditions. And, this could explain as well how people's tendency to withdraw from tragic experiences is definitely the cause of their unresolved grief.

Working through grief

In the Algerian culture, denial of death and withdrawal is seen as a sign of disbelief for faith in Allah includes a high level of involvement. Indeed, showing an accepting attitude which allows openness and a humble expression of emotions in time of death is believed to make the grief work possible.

In the Algerian culture, we put much stress on the benefits of talking about the dead or talking to him at the time of death. In fact, the first week following death, visits to the family of the deceased, commonly recorded as good deeds in religious life, are expected at all hours of the day or night. Talking about the departed is encouraged since it is believed to help release feelings of pain and anger. I remember when my father died; our front door remained open seven days and nights. We cooked meals for many people every day and our main conversation had turned around my father's life. We had a chance to hear many unimaginable stories about him; how he used to help the poor and never turned down the needy.

While the experience of the grief work is difficult, it is also believed to be a blessing; a blessing to be able to express destructive feelings of shock, anger, guilt, anxiety, depression and sometimes despair or protest and to finally remember the lost one not with emotional pain but with a sentiment of serenity. In addition to that, belief in predestination makes also tragic moments easier to bear.

Belief in predestination

For the Muslim believer, God remains the Merciful, the Creator. For the average Algerian man then, being a good believer means to have a blind faith in God, and knowing that the hand of God is totally supreme, anything is then possible. And, such is the profound significance of the expression "with the will of God, "Insha Allah", so often pronounced, becoming one of the components of life in this Muslim community. Insha Allah is such an

essential component of day life that no one can undertake to do anything significant without repeating “with the will of God”, as if by counting without the blessing of God, the provider hopes shatter. For the Muslim then, each accomplished act is only a sign of the will of Allah. Consequently, many local customs have been mixed with Qu’ranic imperatives in order to become fundamental practices

The Arab world sees the universe running its predestined course, determined by the will of God (Allah), who not only guides the world at large but, also predestines the fate of each and every man. Whatever man is or does and whatever happens to him is directly willed by Allah. The Arab remembers God at all times and believes that any event that occurs in everyday life is determined by His personal decision. Belief in predestination gives the Arab calmness, patience and acceptance of his circumstances, which make crises, hazards, and deprivation in life easier to bear. It also creates an attitude of passivity and disinclination to undertake efforts and precautions to change or improve things. So to come back to the case of the mountain dweller, it is that unwillingness to change things, which triggers the feeling of irritation.

According to religious beliefs, each human life is for a fixed term. This way, the whole life from birth to death is marked by a series of Islamic ceremonies, rites and customs. However, as much as Islam teaches peace, self-control and patience, in the Algerian view any event that is outside routine turns into a raging one. As usual, emotionalism in the Algerian society is expected to crop up mostly on the occasion of death or dying. Sunni Algerians believe that there is no harm in crying over the dead.

But, it is also obvious that as mutation the Algerian society is going through is growing, its influencing over ways of life is increasing. For that manner, respecting the written observations of the Sunni and following cultural, religious and moral rules is taken with an increasing liberty. As well, hard conditions of life in Algeria and precariousness have also greatly influenced social, religious and moral life. Nevertheless, Algerian traditions and customs in relation with funeral ceremonies did not change much.

The funeral tradition

In the Muslim world, the mosque and the water belong together. Surprisingly, while water is cited in the Qu’ ran as being the source of life, it is considered at the point of death as the drop that eases the agony of death. The washing of the body serves a sort of hygiene of the self, for Allah should be approached with purity. A Muslim is taught in many ways not to be afraid of death and, especially to treat a dying person with all the respect a human being deserves. Most often Algerians describe the final end of a good believer as being calm, easy

and painless. And, relatives, friends and especially neighbors are expected to look after the dying as tradition and religion demands that moments of joy be shared as well as moments of sorrow.

When death occurs, there remains a last bath to prepare the dead body before covering it with brand-new white linen with no apparent stitches on it. In the Algerian tradition, old and respectable ladies prepare the bodies of women and young children whereas; moderate men prepare the bodies of pubescent and older men. Both men and women are supposed to be practicing Muslims. After washing the body of the deceased carefully, there is a custom of exposing the face of the deceased to men, women and even children if the parents judge it beneficial. Realism and simplicity are crucial parts of the Algerian Sunni teachings. In the cemetery, in large cities, professionals who are employed by the state do the shoveling but, in small regions of the countryside where most cemeteries are owned by ethnic groups, very close relatives of the deceased do the shoveling. A hole is opened in the earth to receive the body.

It is important to mention that all graves look alike insofar as simplicity is a fundamental requirement in the choice of the gravestone whereas; the surface used is standard. As for flower decoration, it is not a common tradition in Algeria. Muslim fundamentalists refuse to mark the graves. However, the young of today fight these ancient values when it concerns the grave of their parents. Women and young children are not allowed to attend funerals. The use of coffins is forbidden and visits to the cemetery are open on the second day of the burial. It is interesting to note that during the period of condolence, the Muslim visitor is not expected to wear black or dark clothing; his physical presence is the only comfort. Forty days after the burial, another meal is prepared but this time, by the family of the newly bereaved; memories are shared again but, this time with patience and warmth. Prayers are recited to affirm Allah's will and glory.

The arrangement of the tombs is very similar from one region to another. The underground dwellings are divided according to tribes, with an empty space being left between the clan areas. The tribe owns many cemeteries; a person may be buried in any of the areas allotted to the clan. For religious reason the dead is always buried towards the East. Each family has its own row, and people of the same family are always buried beside one another. Each clan has its own separate cemetery named after the ancestor who is buried there according to tradition. With this regard, Bourdieu says: “the clan, which unites several extended families, generally has its own district, its own cemetery, its eponymous ancestor and its own patrimony...” (*Pierre Bourdieu, 1962, p41*) The memory of the ancestor of the

clan is recalled at an annual ceremony, which concludes with a communal meal. However, nowadays, with the high cost of living, this old tradition is inclined to going out in the Algerian society.

Faith in the afterlife

Faith in the afterlife is essential to being a Muslim. It is the main incentive for growing and acting responsibly in life. Islam teaches the Muslim believer that death is a voyage from one place to another. Death is not the annihilation of individuality. Therefore, the Muslim believer has to accept death as well as all sorts of catastrophic events that happen in life with patience, with the hope of an eternal meeting in paradise. Moreover, in the Sunni tradition, the believer is not allowed to show sorrow and grief neither in his daily appearance nor in his social life more than three days. However, the wife of the deceased is supposed not to show up much in public and not to wear make up or shameless clothes for four months and ten days as a way to show respect and fidelity to the marriage institution (*Yssuf al kardawi, 2002, p230-231*). In dealing with the death of a loved one, a person comes face to face with his own mortality. Death is a break from the problems of everyday life. Thinking of death should not be upsetting because it is as natural as what we experience in sleep.

Ethical responsibility in this world is therefore linked to the accountability in the next. Traditionalists say that a diseased soul may suffer terribly, according to the deeds done in life on earth. A healthy soul will react joyfully to all conditions of the life to come. The bodies of saints are believed to remain intact. However, the bodies of people are known to disintegrate at death while the soul is characterized by continuity and awareness. It is believed to get out of the body to meet God (*The holy Qu'ran, 89:27-30*). The Qu'ran makes it clear that a serene soul (that of the good believer) returns to God then back to the body in paradise. Seeing that the soul is single and not compound and that only compound corps disintegrates, the soul does not perish like the body. For that matter, Muslims are not supposed to fear death. Since God gets hold of the soul, death means only its separation from the body (Ibn Seena, Freedom, p165). As well, God promised His believers, through His prophets, to regroup two sorts of happiness – happiness of the soul by making it eternal and happiness of the body by filling the good Muslim believer with wonders in paradise (*The holy Qu'ran, 09, 22; 18, 31; 47, 15; 56, 22; 77, 41-42*).

The case of those lost in the Algerian civic war(1988-2000)

Sometimes a symptom of depression in relationship with mourning can evolve and may take years to resolve. In case of a person declared lost in a civil war for example, or a kidnapping that ends in a terrible fashion, the spouse of the lost person, his mother or one of

his children may never go through this mourning process essential to his/her mental health. To this effect, the mourner feels pain but, can never really believe in the radical separation. Since the body is never brought back home to be buried, the parent of the deceased cannot go through this period of grief and mourning, which is very beneficial to the recovering of peace and serenity. In fact the acceptance of this depressive anguish leads to the sentiment of mourning, nostalgia, and the desire for reparation, and the acceptance of reality (Hassane Zerrouky, 2002).

But, as in the case of those lost in the Algerian civil war during the period of 1988 – 1998, the parents and relatives say that as long as the restitution of the bodies has not been made, it is precisely that hope of seeing their children alive one day, that keeps them alive and preserves them as well from mental depression. While many mothers affirmed that if they knew for sure that their children were killed, their pain would certainly be appeased, others confirmed that as long as the bodies have not been found, the sentiment of mourning is impossible even if, time alleviates the suffering. Deep inside, victims of terrorism in Algeria believe that going through the mourning process would be recognition of death. And, since the Algerian authorities have not officially identified the bodies with direct evidence, it remains very hard for them to go through the period of grief and mourning of lost parents and relatives (Liess Boukra, 2002). An Algerian mother who appeared on the Algerian TV testified:

“If my son has committed an error, judge him. If he is dead, tell me. My pain will then diminish” (La nébuleuse Islamiste, 2002, P294)

As well, among children, the knowledge of the state between death and mourning is clearly determined by the existence of a body whereas every eventual separation implies a process of mourning. It is important to say that this mourning process is progressive and it takes only time to progress once more in the evolution of one’s intellectual, affective and cognitive acquisitions.

Suffering includes a therapeutic dimension: looking for moments of separation, traumatizing events and the evaluation of the child’s resentment. To this effect, and in order to help a mourning child, it is important for the whole family to focus on the child’s needs, to simply talk to him about the tragedy and to bring forth others’ experiences with death and mourning. In fact, simply discussing death, suffering after the death of a dear one, being able to respond to the child’s questions will surely attenuate the child’s suffering therefore, allowing him to get out of his depressive state. At this stage only, can he disinvest the lost one and acquire a comprehension of death as a separation that is radical and inevitable. At the

end, it would be beneficial to go through the most important stages the terminal patient passes through before accepting death.

Most common emotional reaction to death

The model suggested by Elizabeth Kubler - Ross indicates that the dying goes through five important stages: Shock and denial followed by isolation, anger and revolt, bargaining and depression and finally acceptance of death and religious beliefs. According to her these different stages of death do not happen in a particular order. And, many patients do not reach the final stage of growth (Kubler - Ross, Death, 1975).

I personally had the chance to follow the evolution of severe illness with family members or close friends. And, I actually observed these different stages which I regroup into three main ones in this short experience I lived step by step that deeply affected my life:

The first and most crucial stage coincides with the moment the terminal patient learns the severity of his health condition. The immediate reaction is often the temptation to avoid facing death. I definitely observed this behavior with my colleague at the University. He had been admitted in March of 2007 for intensive care at Ibn Sina Hospital because of a lung cancer. This friend died four months later. He had been smoking up to four packs of cigarettes per day for over thirty years. His first reaction face to the severity of his health condition was total denial. He would speak to me for e.g. of being admitted for severe anemia while he had three or four meters of the small intestine sectioned already; that doctors were expecting medication from Algiers, the Capital in order to do a second surgery on him, and most important of all that doctors did not detect any malignancy.

In fact, explained his doctors, this well known self defense mechanism reduces the choc of the terrible sudden awareness. Indeed, once my colleague became conscious that no recovery was considered despite hospital intensive care, and that hospitalization isolated him too long from his family and friends, he became suddenly frustrated and angry. These feelings were expressed through aggressive behavior and unreasonable complaints. In few weeks, my colleague habitually calm and rather wise showed a despairing revolt against the hospital institution. His doctors explained that this common exteriorization of deep sentiment of despair actually relieves deep inner pain.

In the second stage, my friend insisted to have more information about his illness. Then, the professionals' reaction to his insistence on knowing the whole truth was to talk to him about his short life expectancy or imminent death. Even though, he knew he was dying soon, he accepted radio and chemical therapies in order to live a little longer – may be just enough to put his financial and family affairs in order. The fact remains that he showed

sadness and depression and his immediate parting words were clear messages of forgiveness to all colleagues.

In the last stage of my colleague's illness, under hospital recommendation two of my colleagues kept him company day and night. For that matter, they were exempt from our department from academic charges. They would give him drops of water, pray with him a lot, read him verses of the Qu'ran or just sit next to him and hold his hand. At the end, he was unable to talk. So, they would communicate with glances or movements of the head. Indeed, I felt that their presence alone was reassuring.

In the Algerian culture, Islamic values are affirmed from birth to death. All rites performed on the occasion of death and dying express submission to the Maktub. The fatalist aspect of the holy message may very well explain the attitudes of Muslims toward death and dying. Religious faith is then supposed to heal painful wounds, and relieve emotional sorrow. It is also supposed to bring hope; Hope for a better future to the mourner who shows internal strength and patience especially when pain is at its apogee, and accepts God's will with resignation. What mourners do in most cases is pray, and hopes that the loved one rests finally in peace in heaven. As well, the Muslim teachings view death as the final stage of growth in life; that death is not total, for only the body disintegrates while the soul, the spirit is eternal. Then, the spirit of the dead returns back to Allah until the day of resurrection comes. This day is also called the day of final judgment when all creatures on earth are gathered together, and confronted before Allah.

Conclusion

In the Algerian society, people are prepared for death through Islam, traditions and customs. It is well known that the death of a loved one is hard to accept. But, faith in God and in the after-death brings patience. Therefore, it brings a healthy healing from extreme pain.

Traditions in the Algerian community see home as the best place one dies, not leaving the bedside of the dying, taking care of him while praying and reciting verses of the Holy Qu'ran as well as participating in the funeral ceremony are judged as fundamental parts of the Muslim faith. As well, grief is encouraged, as it is believed that with grief comes growth.

Footnotes

1 - Ian Young. The Private Life of Islam, pp10 – 23.

2 - Ibid.

3 - Ibid.

4 - Ibid.

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